

# Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche

*Edited and Translated by  
Christopher Middleton.*

370 pp. Chicago:

*The University of Chicago Press.*  
\$10.

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By **WALTER KAUFMANN**

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The lives and letters of great philosophers generally elicit much less interest than the biographies of great artists and writers. Indeed, it is widely taken for granted that Descartes and Hobbes, Locke and Berkeley, Kant and Hegel were rather dull, led uneventful lives, and are not worth knowing as human beings. If anyone reads a philosopher's letters, it is almost always another philosopher in search of illumination of a philosophic point.

Nietzsche is an exception. He was such an interesting person that some British and American philosophy professors and dons felt for a long time that he simply could not have been a philosopher. Moreover, he had written some of the best German prose, and that, too, suggested that he could hardly have been a German philosopher. But today not only the Germans and the French acknowledge him as one of the greatest philosophers of all time, the English-speaking world has come around, too. Further exposure to his writings may well lead the present student generation to a more adventurous conception of the nature and role of philosophy.

Meanwhile many of the major writers of the 20th century have found inspiration not only in Nietzsche's books but also in his life and character: most notably, Thomas Mann in his late novel, "Doctor Faustus," but also Freud, Malraux and Camus, Rilke, and several other German poets. And for all who have felt the fascination of Nietzsche as a man, his letters have always been of the utmost interest.

The first German collection filled six volumes but did not yet contain the correspondence with Franz Overbeck (his best friend), with Richard Wagner, and with August Strindberg. By

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Mr. Kaufmann has translated 10 of Nietzsche's books, five of them included recently in "Basic Writings of Nietzsche." His most recent book is "Tragedy and Philosophy."

1921 these were available, but it was common knowledge that there were many more as yet unpublished letters and that in the published letters not a few passages had been omitted.

In 1938 a "historical-critical" edition of the letters was begun, but it was broken off four years later, after the fourth volume, and it never got beyond 1877, although Nietzsche's major works were written in the eighteen-eighties.

In 1956 Karl Schlechta included a selection of 278 letters in the last volume of his popular but unscholarly German three-volume edition of Nietzsche's works. In 1968 I included some previously unpublished letters in the third, greatly enlarged edition of my "Nietzsche." Now the Germans have announced a new critical edition of Nietzsche's letters in 15 volumes. The editors, in East Germany, are two Italians, Giorgio Colli and Mazziono Montinari, neither of whom has made any name for himself as a Nietzsche scholar. The "International Nietzsche Bibliography" (1968), which lists over 4,500 titles about Nietzsche, does not list a single contribution by either of them. The first of the 15 volumes is yet to appear.

Christopher Middleton's new selection includes 206 letters and is based mainly on Schlechta's selection. The arrangement is chronological, and there are over 600 editorial footnotes as well as an index of 30 recipients and a general index, which includes mainly names and does not cover the editorial matter. Mr. Middleton is a well-known poet and translator, a professor of German at the University of Texas, and a co-editor of "German Life and Letters." He has put an immense amount of work into this volume and made it so good that I cannot help wishing it were better.

That Nietzsche's letters deserve to be translated is clear, and it would make no sense to wait until the new critical edition is complete. German "critical editions" are notoriously uncritical and include vast amounts of material that it would be utterly pointless to translate. What we need is a selection, though a more comprehensive selection would be still more useful.

The present volume includes six of eleven known letters to George Brandes, the Danish critic who "discovered" Nietzsche in 1887; four of the six to Jacob Burckhardt, the great Swiss historian; three of the six to Strindberg; and nine of the eleven letters to Richard Wagner. Of about 275 published letters and cards to Peter Gast, a young composer who

helped Nietzsche with printer's proofs and shared, by mail, many of Nietzsche's thoughts and experiences, Middleton has chosen 29, and of the 227 to Franz Overbeck 30. In these 30 the many passages omitted in the 1916 edition of the correspondence with Overbeck are left out, although they were made public by Erich Podach in 1963 and the letters themselves can be consulted in the University Library in Basel.

The first German collected edition included over 500 letters and cards to mother and sister, but in 1956 Schlechta showed that 32 of these were inauthentic. In composing these epistles to herself, the sister made free use of letters and drafts for letters to others, giving the impression that her brother, who had actually repudiated her as an "anti-Semitic goose," had felt close to her to the last. The 25 authentic letters Middleton has chosen never seem to be dictated by any bias. One gathers that he first translated the letters he found interesting in Schlechta's selection and then added a few more.

Casting about for a passage one might quote to give some idea of Nietzsche as a letter writer, one is struck by the loss in translation of the almost acrobatic brilliance of his prose. The electricity is gone, or what Nietzsche called the "light feet."

Let me nevertheless quote the beginning of an early letter to Erwin Rohde, who as a student was Nietzsche's best friend and later gained eminence as a classical philologist. This was written in November, 1868, when Nietzsche, aged 24, had just returned to the University of Leipzig from his military service. He came within an inch of giving up philology. Less than three months later, before he had completed his doctorate, he was offered a chair at the University of Basel, accepted—but resigned 10 years later to devote himself exclusively to his own work.

"My dear friend:

"To see again from close at hand the seething brood of the philologists of our time, and every day having to observe their moleish pullulating, the baggy cheeks and the blind eyes, their joy at capturing worms and their indifference to the true problems, the urgent problems of life—not only the young ones doing it, but also the old, full-grown ones — all this makes me see more and more clearly that the two of us, if this is to be our only means of remaining true to the spirit in us, shall not go our way in life without a variety of offenses and intrigues."

Unfortunately this volume, although generally of a very

high caliber and altogether beyond comparison with two earlier collections in English, is marred by occasional errors in both translation and scholarship. A catalogue would be out of place here; a few illustrations must suffice:

"Yesterday I saw Rée's book . . . I felt very differently about the semi-novel of his *soeur inséparable* Salomé, whom I could at once jokingly picture." Not only is that last clause rather awkward, but Nietzsche actually writes: "which by a funny coincidence I came across at the very same time."

The editorial comments on Nietzsche's relationship to Lou Salomé perpetuate some old errors, including the claim that Nietzsche proposed marriage to her. Middleton mentions expressly that he did not see Rudolph Binion's "Frau Lou" and the new edition of my "Nietzsche" (both 1968) "before the present work went to press," and he relies heavily on Podach and Schlechta whose erroneous accounts of this episode place Nietzsche in a bad light. Ironically, Podach had used against Nietzsche some letters which Schlechta later showed, without mentioning Podach, to be forgeries, and Podach in turn argued in his last two books, without referring to this issue, that Schlechta's scholarship was beneath contempt. Occasionally, the Nietzsche literature is quite amusing. Without entering into its intricacies, we may note that Middleton trusts these two gentlemen far too much and that he translates, with omissions, only two letters to Rée and six to Lou, while Binion and I were able to make use of 34 to Rée and 25 to Lou, without omissions, as well as many other letters (including scores from Paul Rée) that have some bearing on this story.

On another level, we are told in a footnote that a *Regierungsrat* was the "equivalent of a senator in the United States and a member of Parliament in England." One of my uncles, who was later shot by the Gestapo, was a *Regierungsrat* before he was promoted to *Oberregierungsrat*, but was never elected to any office at all. These were simply titles given to high-ranking civil servants.

*Jüdischer Luxus* is a Jewish lavishness or largesse, not "Jewish usury"—a cliché that makes no sense of the passage into which the translator has introduced it. But it would be ungrateful to continue in this vein. Let us hope that these and other mistakes will soon be corrected in a new enlarged edition. For Nietzsche's letters are fascinating, and the present edition represents a stupendous labor of love. ■